



News Analysis: Italy's new coronavirus curbs focus on balancing health, economy

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ROME, Oct. 19 (Xinhua) – The latest round of coronavirus restrictions in Italy were milder than expected, according to news outlets and commentators, but health experts said they focused on the areas where they'll be most effective.

The new restrictions put into place during the weekend by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte include limits on activities at pubs, bars, and restaurants up until midnight (or 6 p.m. if customers must stand), outlawing amateur contact sports, fairs, and festivals, and giving local officials the right to require town squares to close down at 9 p.m. local time.

Suggestions are for in-home social events to be limited to six invitees, more workers to work from home, and schools and universities are encouraged to have staggered schedules to reduce the number of students on campus.

The limits seem tame compared to those in some other European countries where the spread of the virus has been stronger in recent weeks, and reports are that many in Italy expected severer limits.

"I think the government is trying to focus the rules where they will have the biggest effect with the fewest restrictions," Giovanni Maga, head of the DNA Enzymology and Molecular Virology Unit at the Institute of Molecular Genetics IGM-CNR National Research Council, told Xinhua.

"I don't think we're at the point of having to shut down productive activities and other major parts of the economy in order to be effective. I think the best thing is to take these steps, wait to see how effective they are, and then re-evaluate in two or three weeks."

That view is supported by the government contact tracing research from earlier this month showing that 77 percent of new coronavirus infections occurred between family members who get infected at social gatherings, such as pubs, parties, or weddings.

The infection rate in Italy has been on the rise, with the seven-day average steadily climbing for six straight weeks. Monday's total of 9,338 new infections was the first decline in a week, falling from the record total of 11,705 on Sunday. But Maga and others said that comparing the current infection rate figures to those from March and April was not useful.

"The entire situation has changed," Maga said. "We did a fraction as many tests in the spring and only focused on symptomatic patients. The infection rate today, as a percentage of all tests, is far lower. Doctors know how to treat patients more effectively and hospitals are better prepared."

Riccardo Puglisi, an economist in the Department of Political Science at the University of Pavia, said the government's biggest challenge is to strike the right balance between confronting the health risks without putting too much of a drag on the economy.

"Everybody was very pleased with the strong growth figures for the economy in the third quarter and I don't think anyone wants to put the breaks on that," Puglisi said in an interview. "The government is trying to keep people safe while keeping the damage to the economy to within 10 percent. I think we may see partial lockdowns where there are outbreaks but the hope is that these latest measures will have an impact."

Puglisi was referring to estimates for Italy's gross domestic product, which is expected to contract dramatically this year due mostly to the impacts of Italy's March-to-May national coronavirus lockdown. The latest estimates, from the International Monetary Fund, predict the economy will shrink by 10.6 percent in 2020, though the Italian Treasury predicted a more optimistic 9.0-percent contraction on the basis of improving conditions in the second half of the year. Enditem



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